Meet the Comics With John McPherson Creator, "Close to Home"
Hosted by Suzanne Tobin
Washington Post Comics Editor
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Welcome to the Washington Post Style section comics discussion, hosted by Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin.

Since 1990, John McPherson has been providing daily humor to readers across the country in his cartoon panel, "Close to Home." McPherson was online Friday, Aug. 3 at 1 p.m. EDT to answer questions and take comments about his daily cartoon.

A transcript follows below.

Born and raised in Painted Post, N.Y., McPherson first began drawing cartoons at age five. Discouraged by the poor reviews these early cartoons received, McPherson decided to put his cartooning career on hold until he was 25. In 1990 he left his engineering job and began full-time freelancing. Since that time, McPherson has published numerous collections of his cartoons as well as page-a-day calendars. He has also illustrated several books and continues to work for magazines. Mcpherson, his wife, Laura, and their son now reside in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

Editor's Note: Washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Suzanne Tobin: Hi, everyone, and welcome to "Comics: Meet the Artist" with John McPherson, the cartoonist who does "Close to Home." John is joining us from Lake George, N.Y., where he is on vacation with his wife and two sons, ages 9 and 4. Bear with us, today, since we may have to take a discipline break occassionally, since his wife has deserted him and gone to a craft fair.

John McPherson: Hi, everyone, thanks for tuning in each day to "Close to Home," and it is an honor to be here to take your questions.

Silver Spring, Md.: What is your favorite music? What CDs are in your player right now? Thanks for putting on such a funny strip!

John McPherson: I like the group Train, the Wallflowers, Counting Crows, but then I've also got the Steve Miller Band, Jackson Browne, Bonnie Raitt.. A healthy dose of the old and new. (And, of course, Lawrence Welk.)

Silver Spring, Md.: Do you ever find the one panel to be limiting?

How do you find ways to get around it?

John McPherson: Well, I don't know if I really consider it limiting. Sometimes I envy strip cartoonists, because they can develop characters and story lines and keep the plot line going. But what I always liked as a kid and as a reader was the instantaneous humor of the single panel cartoon. I always wanted that "bang" humor. I didn't want to have to wade through three or four panels. Like most Americans, I'm into instant gratification.

McLean, Va.: I think your cartoon is one of the funniest in the Post. Do you spend a lot of time around hospitals or what? How do you get your ideas and how do you refine them?

John McPherson: No, I don't spend a lot of time around hospitals, however I was born in one, so I feel this sort of kinship towards them. But actually the reason I do so many medical cartoons is because I've learned that stress and humor are very closely related. And the more stressful a situation I can place my characters in, the more opportunity for humor there is.
Ideas are obviously hard to come up wit., I look at a lot of other cartoon books, and try to steal as many ideas from as possible from those other cartoonists. Seriously, I'm very visually oriented and just a scene from another cartoon book can spark an idea. I also read a lot of magazines on topics I'm trying to get ideas about, like a parenting magazine and medical magazines--there's all kinds of bizarre magazine out there.

Silver Spring, Md.: I am learning how to cartoon. I have a lot of ideas but I still have a lot to learn about drawing -- it takes so long to finish one panel! Do you have any shortcuts or tips that you would be willing to share? Like how do you get those little dots? Also, my cartoons seem to turn off some people because they get grossed out when I poke fun at stuff like tongue scrapers and leg waxing. Seeing your morbid sense of humor in a mainstream paper gives me hope!

John McPherson: As far as how long it takes to draw a cartoon, if you're just starting out, that's just the way it is. There really aren't any shortcuts, unless you want to draw stick figures, but you don't want to do that.
When I first started out, it gook me six to eight hours to do one panel. I just kept erasing and erasing, just to get the perspective down. And when I was done, it looked like it was drawn by a spastic orangutan. But it was still cool. I still kept at it, because I loved it.
That's what kept me going. You have to do it because you enjoy it.
As for people being turned off by your material, who are you showing these to? If you are you showing them to nuns or your grandmother, than I guess that's understandable.
If these are close friends of yours, and they're turned off by them, then you might want to back off.
Or maybe you DO want to shock people with your cartoons.
The one thing I don't want people to do is say, "Oh, isn't that cute?" At the same time, I'm not trying to shock people with my cartoons.

Washington, D.C.: How did you learn to cartoon? Did you take a lot of drawing classes?

John McPherson: I didn't start drawing until I was 25. I was a

mechanical engineer by day and started fooling around with cartooning at night as a hobby. And I just taught myself to draw by looking at other people's work. And I think that that is very helpful and a good thing to do up to a certain point, and that point is you don't want your work to look like someone else's, but you want to take what's good about their style and incorporate into your own.
I never took any classes.
But the thing that my engineering training gave me was good business sense. For a long time I was a freelance cartoonist, and that business sense allowed me to survive, because I looked at this as a businessman, not as an "artiste."
A lot of cartoonists hate that part of their work, they'd just rather draw, but the fact is you have to sell yourself. And you've got to get on the phone, and call editors, and make things happen, because they're not going to come knocking on your door.

Springfield, Va.:

Mr McPherson,

I really enjoy reading your column in the Washington Post. I've always wondered about the appearance of your characters -- they usually look old, even the young ones. How did you develop your drawing style?

Keep up the great work!

Karl

John McPherson: Thanks for the compliment.
As for my characters' appearance, I don't really know why they are the way they are, that's just the way they come out. I'm not sure that I have much control over them at this point, I think they have

more control over me now.
I think any cartoonist's drawing style just sort of evolves. I did look at other people's work, as I mentioned earlier, but my style is constantly evolving, I'm always making little changes in it. So the cartoon will probably look different 10 years from now.

College Park, Md.: There always seems to be a Gary Larsonish feel to your comics (and I don't say that just because you occupy his former space in the Post). I know this is the obvious question in every one of these chats, but who are your influences? What comics do you read now?

By the by, thanks for being right below Family Circus, so it doesn't stick in my head too long.

John McPherson: Well, first of all, I don't think that any single panel cartoonist who's out there right now--who came out after Gary Larson--could honestly say he hasn't been influenced by Gary Larson. But that is the way of all artists. Likewise, I don't think that very many musicians out there today could honestly say that the Beatles haven't had some influence on them.
And one thing that few people know is it appears that Gary Larson was influenced by B. Kliban. There are a lot of similarities between them. The point I'm trying to make is that we learn from what we enjoy and appreciate and we take some elements of those things and put them into our own work.
But I would say the big difference between "Close to Home" and "The Far Side" is the subject matter. In "Close to Home," I don't have any aliens or talking creatures, it's much more of a reality-based cartoon. Likewise in "The
Far Side," he didn't deal much with pregnancy and toddler issues and office scenarios like I do in "Close to Home."
I can understand that it's a very similar kind of "absurd humor" but

I was probably more influenced by Charles Addams. He is my all-time favorite cartoonist. He was a cartoonist with the New Yorker magazine for about 60 years. His cartoons are what spawned the "Addams Family" TV show and movies. His cartoons were just so funny and sick for the era they were drawn in, so I would say he has had the biggest influence on me.
Also, Jim Unger of "Herman."
Beyond that, there are a lot of freelancers who wouldn't be known to the general public but that I've admired for quite a long time.

Painted Post, N.Y.: John,
We work with your brother in Painted Post. It's obvious to us that you and your brother share the same sense of humor. We read your comic strip everyday and we honestly think that you have been inspired by some of your brothers antics. Do you have any idea what he keeps in his closet at work? If you do, we hope that we will see it in your daily strip soon. Also, if you have as good of stories about him as he does about you we would be glad to hear them. Keep up the good work.
Linda & Anne

John McPherson: Thanks for your kind words. I'm not sure what brother you're referring to. There was an old hobo who lived in our house who called himself Keith, who occassionally would try to pass himself off as my brother.
Is that who you're thinking of?
If that is indeed old Keith that you're working with, ask him if he recalls the time he drove a motorcycle through the door of the Erwin Motel.

Suzanne Tobin: Excuse us while I take a short break so I can chat with John's 4-year-old to keep him happy.

Reston, Va.: Do you have any books available?

John McPherson: So nice of you to ask (are you related to my publisher?)
I have, let me think, about 12 "Close to Home" collections out, so there are plenty available. You can get them from Amazon.com. My latest collection that will be coming out in the fall is called "The Scourge of Vinyl Car Seats." I also have a collection of purely medical cartoons called "The Get Well Book."
And then there's a line of greeting cards that's coming out from Recycled Paper Products. Those will be hitting the stores soon, if they haven't already. And I'd like to mention my 2002 block calendar, which has a cartoon for every day. (The term "Page A Day" is copyrighted, so DON'T call it that.)

Herndon, Va.: Who are some of your favorite cartoonists? Are you friendly with any of them?

John McPherson: Yeah, that's been one of the really nice things about this experience--getting to know my peers. Bill Amend and I are good friends. He does "Fox Trot." I'm friendly with Cathy Guisewite of "Cathy", Tom Wilson Sr. and Jr., who do "Ziggy" and Jan Eliot, who does "Stone Soup," is one of my close friends. Lynn Johnston of "For

Better or For Worse" is also one of the ones I know well. I've met many others and they all seem like great people.

Fairfax, Va.: John -- Your panels have several places of honor on our refrigerator -- they are a riot.

John McPherson: I'm flattered, but feel I should warn you that all that extra weight on the door is not good for the hinges.

Oak Hill, Va.: What is your kids' reaction to your being a famous cartoonist? Do they ever want to help out?

John McPherson: Yes, my 9-year-old son is constantly trying to think up ideas for me, and he has been successful once. He came up with an idea that was very good, and that panel even got a lot of e-mail responses.

Herndon, Va.: Do you ever not do a cartoon because it's too hard to draw?

John McPherson: I will say that yes, ideas come along that are really hard to draw and I'm torn because ideas are so hard to come up with in the first place. But sometimes I feel like I don't want to draw a

stadium scene with a zillion heads in the background.
Or sometimes I try to draw something and I can't get the perspective or the likeness, and then I just move on to something else.
With the daily deadlines, you really don't have the luxury of obsessing over something, you just have to keep moving.

Oak Hill, Va.: Do you ever get hate mail?

John McPherson: Yeah, I don't know if it's hate mail, but the general tone is "You suck." And for a while I took it personally but then I talked to other cartoonists, and they all get this stuff.
Sometimes I don't know if it's really even directed to me, it seems like they send a blanket e-mail out to tons of people.
The fact is that no matter what you do, if you're in the public eye, someone's not going to like your stuff.
I heard somewhere that "Seinfeld" was rated really high as far as the people who disliked it. But it didn't really matter, because so many people loved it.
You can't worry about people who don't like your feature, the ones who matter are the people who do like it.
But I don't get a lot of hate mail.
I might get something like that once every two or three months.

John McPherson: Well, it's good this chat is coming to an end because my 4-year-old is hitting the wall. I just want to thank everyone for their insightful questions, and if your question didn't get online, feel free to e-mail me directly at closetohome@compuserve.com.
And, in general, thanks to everyone for tuning in to "Close to Home."

I love hearing from you all.
Because this is such a solitary job, it's been really nice getting feedback from you readers. I look forward to doing this again sometime.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks, John, so much for taking the time away from dad duties for us. Make sure you buy the kids an extra treat for being so good this whole time. I'm sorry we couldn't get to everyone's questions, but we'll be back in two weeks with another installment of "Comics" Meet the Artist." And if you had a question about The Post specifically that I might be able to help with, please e-mail me at tobins@washingtonpost.com